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'JFK': A Lie, But Harmless

"JFK," Oliver Stone's paranoid fantasy about the Kennedy assassination, has been widely attacked in print. For Stone, the attacks are an extension of the monstrous conspiracy to kill Kennedy, with the media auxiliaries again taking up their places 28 years after the fact. For others, like Garry Trudeau, the attacks are a lapse of journalistic manners, a case of overkill.

Yet the simplest explanation for the fact that many of those who know anything about the Kennedy era have felt compelled to point out the fantastic and mendacious quality of the film is that the film is fantastic and mendacious. The idea of Stone, lone and courageous, standing up to triangulated fire from Establishment lackeys is appealing to Stone's paranoia and self-righteousness. But it is a laugh. In one corner: a $40 million Hollywood film, featuring the nation's number one heartthrob, endowed with a publicity budget of millions, showing in 900 movie theaters. In the other corner: perhaps a dozen scribblers writing in various magazines and op-ed pages. You don't need Marshall McLuhan to figure out who's got more clout.

I make no apology, therefore, for piling on. I feel it something of a duty. As film, "JFK" is a success: a big lie told with such self-assurance and technical skill that it can disturb, even convince, the most skeptical. As history, "JFK" is a travesty. It has the structure and texture of a Stalinist show trial. Stalin, of course, had to torture his victims into their public, scripted confessions of participation in a vast and nefarious conspiracy. Stone had only to recruit actors to do the same.

If you want to see a spiritual ancestor of "JFK," go see "Mission to Moscow," the 1943 memoir of a particularly gullible U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph Davies. "Mission to Moscow," a paean to "Uncle Joe" (Stalin), earnestly whitewashed the Moscow show trials of the 1930s and endorsed the guilt of those accused of (and condemned for) an absurdly complicated conspiracy of Trotskyites, Nazis and Western agents to sabotage the workers' paradise.

Half a century later, the same studio (Warner: a nice historical touch) brings you the new show trial. The crime this time is larger—the overthrow of American democracy—and the conspiracy even more vast: the CIA, the FBI, Bell Helicopter, anti-Castro Cubans, a New Orleans homosexual underground, the mob, the Secret Service, Dallas police, the whole damn military-industrial complex—with autopsy doctors, the chief justice of the United States and the next president as accessories after the fact.

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It is testimony to the power of film as propaganda, and to the skill of Oliver Stone as propagandist, that the film works. Interspersing fabricated characters, dialogue and events with real footage, Stone can persuade the perfectly reasonable and unsuspecting viewer. It is only upon reflection one realizes the absurdity of the film's premise: That in a country where the fixing of a handful of game shows could not be held secret, a near-universal assassination conspiracy has remained airtight for 28 years.

In fact, the film rests on a dozen such absurdities. My favorite is the charge that Earl Warren, a liberal so principled that he would not countenance the conviction of one Ernesto Miranda on the grounds that police had neglected to read him his rights, was accessory to a fascist coup d'etat.

My only dissent from "JFK's" critics has to do not with the nature of Stone's lies but with the lies' lasting impact. There will be little. Yes, there will be kids who, knowing nothing of the era (and little about anything else), will believe the movie. But what is the quality of that belief? Anyone who truly believes this film should immediately sign up with the Red Brigades. Its point, after all, is that in 1963 America was taken over by a fascist conspiracy, that post-Kennedy America is a vast Orwellian system of deception and repression.

Where are the anti-fascist protests? The kids have certainly not been pacified by a few skeptical op-ed pieces. By what then? They have been pacified by the very same popular culture Stone seeks to harness for his political agenda. He fails, however, because American popular culture is a poor vehicle for serious political dissent. Its capacity to trivialize everything—even riveting, raging political paranoia—is just too great. When Stone argues the great fascist plot on the morning chat show circuit, sandwiched between Willard Scott and a new legume diet, one is hardly moved to run to the barricades.

Early in the days of glasnost, a formerly suppressed anti-Stalinist movie, "Repentance," caused a sensation when shown in Moscow. It helped begin a revolution in political consciousness that ultimately brought down the Soviet Union. That is what happens in a serious political culture. Which is why it does not happen here. "JFK's" message is at least as disturbing as that of "Repentance." Yet it is received by a citizenry so overwhelmed with cultural messages, and so anesthetized to them, that a message as explosive as Stone's might raise an eyebrow, but never a fist.

A politics so trivialized is conducive to neither great decision making nor decisive leadership. But it is also nicely immunized from the worst of political pathologies. In the end, Oliver Stone—like David Duke and Louis Farrakhan and the rest of America's dealers in paranoia—is just another entertainment, another day at the movies. The shallowness of our political culture has a saving grace.